

10-1-1964

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Herbert T. Mayer

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Recommended Citation

Mayer, Herbert T. (1964) "The Old Testament in the Pulpit," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 35, Article 59.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol35/iss1/59>

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The Old Testament in the Pulpit

By HERBERT T. MAYER

How much should the pastor preach from the Old Testament? Probably the general answer should be: More than he has been doing. A brief review of sermon study series and sermon books published for pastors of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod reveals an average of four or five New Testament studies for each Old Testament text. For example, the homiletical textbook prepared by Reinhold Pieper and used rather widely for many years treats 142 New Testament texts and 25 Old Testament texts. *The Preacher's Manual*, prepared by John H. C. Fritz, has one brief chapter on the Old Testament as lesson material. Walter A. Maier, a specialist in the Old Testament, chose New Testament texts over Old Testament texts for his Lutheran Hour sermons in a ratio of four or five to one. Prior to 1960 this journal carried a total of 126 sermon studies devoted to the Pentateuch out of a total of some 1,800 textual studies. The homiletical studies in the volumes for 1964, 1962, 1948, and 1935 were devoted almost exclusively to texts from the Old Testament. The majority of the 1935 studies were from the major prophets and the Psalter. The historical books received little attention. The 1962 series was taken almost completely from the Psalter. There are only four texts from historical books in this series.

It is likely that less Old Testament preaching actually occurred than even these series analyses indicate. Informal surveys among students would indicate that a five to one ratio in favor of the New Testament is probably low, at least in pulpits of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In other denominations

the percentage of preaching from the Old Testament is likely to be higher, particularly in those confessions where the emphasis on the covenant concept has been strong or where there is a heritage of Puritanic legalism.

One could defend the thesis that the church has never satisfactorily solved the question of the use of the Old Testament or the relationship between the Old Testament and the New. The statistics mentioned above could be interpreted to show that in at least one denomination the Old Testament has been relegated to a secondary position in esteem and use, though each preacher in this denomination would deny this implication concerning his own public use of the Old Testament. Marcion, the heretic from Pontus on the Black Sea, suggested around the middle of the second century, that the church solve the question of the Old Testament by rejecting it completely. "All that we need to know about God's grace," he argues, "is found in my edition of the Gospel according to St. Luke and in the ten epistles of St. Paul." Barnabas, the free-wheeling exegete from the Alexandrian school, solved the problem by completely allegorizing the Old Testament. For example, he explained to his grateful hearers that God gave Abraham 318 servants in order that God might thereby prophesy the coming of Christ Crucified. He pointed out that the number 300 was the Greek *tau* (the Cross) while 18 was made up of the Greek *iota* and *eta*, the first two letters of Jesus' name. The fact that this story was originally recorded in Hebrew and that therefore the Greek numbers would not have been used did not bother Barnabas one bit. In the 19th

century, Adolf Harnack again threw the question at the church whether she was now mature enough to discard the Old Testament, since Biblical scholars had been trying in vain for 200 years to reach some agreement on how to interpret most of its stories and prophecies.

A practical explanation of the greater popularity of the New Testament is undoubtedly the language factor. The skills of the Hebrew language are not learned by many preachers. If they are learned, they are learned only superficially by many, and they seem to rust and deteriorate much more rapidly than the linguistic skills required for studying the New Testament in the original language. Besides, we are told today that a man must also know Aramaic if he is serious about mastering the Old Testament. Others are saying that the real important Old Testament is, after all, the Septuagint, and so once again students are discouraged from mastering Hebrew.

For the past 100 years many well-intentioned preachers have been frightened away from the Old Testament by the complicated and devastating studies of the so-called higher critics. Preachers asked themselves whether they could say that Ex. 12, for example, represented the mind of Moses or that of J, E, D, or even P. "Can I really say to my people, 'Thus says the Lord,' when the most competent scholars do not agree on who spoke these words or when or why they were spoken?"

Another factor in the deemphasis of the Old Testament is undoubtedly what Richard R. Caemmerer has called "New Testament minimalism." "Since the New Testament contains fully all that we need to know for our salvation, why concern our-

selves with the perplexing and incomplete message of the Old Testament," the argument runs. Related to this is a theological attitude which can be called a "Jesus only" theology, or a "Christ-unitarianism." This approach centers all the preacher's attention and energy in Jesus Christ, the world's only Redeemer and the sinner's only Friend. This is a distortion of an incontestably valuable Biblical emphasis. If it is carried to its extreme conclusion, then God the Father, Creator and Preserver of the world, and the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier of the world, the half-known God, disappear into the shadowy recesses of workaday theology. The Old Testament history of God's people has no interest or value for the Christian when this "Jesus only" approach is taken.

Some call attention to the "oasis" concept of the Old Testament as contributing to its deemphasis. According to this view, there are a few beautiful Messianic gems, such as Gen. 3:15, Is. 7:14, and Micah 5:2, which should be proclaimed from the pulpit. There are also a few classical illustrations of human virtues, such as Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, David's defeat of Goliath, and Daniel's dedication to God. These should also be held up before Christians as examples and encouragement. Some of the Psalms belong among the literary masterpieces of the world. They should be preached frequently. But most of the rest of the Old Testament is a kind of theological wasteland which offers neither water nor grass to the weary pilgrim.

Another comment which is heard in many camps of Old Testament scholars is that the dogmatic approach to all of Scripture has eviscerated, if not destroyed, the value of the Old Testament for the

preacher. In this approach both Testaments are ransacked primarily for proof passages to support a given doctrinal point. While some scholars reject this approach totally, others are concerned about it only when it obscures the basic historical nature of the Old Testament accounts. Present-day preachers seem to be divided on the question of whether they studied a Christian dogmatics of the Old Testament or a Biblical theology of the Old Testament when they were students.

There has been another pattern of persistent misuse of the Old Testament by many preachers which eventually results in a fervent dislike of this book by Christian people and even by the preacher himself. In this approach the Old Testament serves as a law code for God's people. The Seventh-day Adventists provide a striking example of this use of the Old Testament. But there is a much more insidious way in which this use creeps into many pulpits. Heirs of the Puritanic legalism which has marked some denominations and churches during the past two or three centuries seem to fall into this legalistic trap quite easily. Members of so-called evangelical churches are by no means immune to this danger. The Old Testament is an excellent scourge to get more action out of God's weary pilgrim people. It seems to be much more effective to say, "Why can't you give like Abraham gave when he left Ur?" than it is to say, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Let us now receive the offering."

In the past generation, as several articles in this issue demonstrate, there has been a revival of interest in the Old Testament that, in the opinion of Arlis Ehlen, bids fair to restore the Old Testament to a po-

sition of honor and value it has not held in the church since the days of the apostles. The reasons for this revival are detailed elsewhere in this issue. We need not repeat them here. Our concern is with the application of these studies to the preaching of the Old Testament. Has a new key been discovered to the Old Testament? Should the alert preacher now divide his choice of texts two to one in favor of the Old Testament? Perhaps Old Testament studies almost warrant a Yes answer to the first question. The second question represents an extreme misapplication of the ideas expressed in this issue. Some believe that the new key is found in the phrase "The God who acts" or in the concept of "covenant." Both ideas are of ancient lineage with a genealogy which traces directly back to the New Testament itself. Were they confused, obscured, or even lost to many preachers? This question is irrelevant and unimportant for our purposes.

The important point is that today every verse of the Old Testament is viewed by most scholars as containing in some way and in some degree the message: "God is acting! God is coming! God is faithful to His covenant promises! His mercy indeed endures forever! God will not cast off His chosen people! God is preparing salvation!" Old Testament theology could be summarized pithily in the phrase, "God cares for us and will deliver us." The preacher is deeply interested in God at work as described in the Old Testament records. He is anxious to identify every act of God, whether it be an act of judgment or an act of mercy. The preacher spends his time learning to view these great acts of God as the prophets did, whether they announced them in advance,

were contemporaneous with them, or looked back at them from the vantage point of later years. The preacher is overwhelmed by the magnificent portrayal of the acting, merciful, loving, faithful, and judging God. From this point of view every word in the Old Testament is "Messianic."

The spotlight swings back and forth from God to His people in the covenant concept. It focuses on God as He creates a people for Himself at Sinai. This event the preacher learns to recognize as the real genesis of the Old Testament story. It was there in the wilderness that the main thread of sacred history began. All that the people thought, said, did, and wrote was somehow related to this transforming experience. The spotlight swings to the people as they pledge themselves to covenant obedience and loyalty, but it remains on them while they defile themselves before the Golden Calf and in a thousand other acts of rebellion. While the reader waits with bated breath, it swings slowly back to Yahweh, the Almighty, the Holy. From those awful lips comes the unbelievable promise that God will be gracious, that He will forgive iniquity and transgression and sin, and that He will continue to love these stubborn people because of His covenant with them.

Another theme which is rather closely related to the covenant theme is the Biblical idea of the kingdom of God. This has been developed by so many Old Testament scholars and preachers that we forego further comment on it. Walter Roehrs shows in this issue that the concept of justification through faith is another thread which runs through the entire Old Testament to tie it together in the mercy and steadfast love of God the Father.

There is a danger resident in present-day

Old Testament studies. They are proving to be so fruitful and so helpful to the preacher that the unwary man may find himself swept away by these new understandings and thus the Old Testament may come to dominate his preaching. It has been suggested, facetiously, we hope, by a number of Old Testament scholars that Marcion's question can now be reversed, and the church can be asked to discard the New Testament since everything she needs to know about God and His salvation is clearly recorded in the Old Testament. This danger is adequately guarded against by the eschatological emphasis which most scholars find in the Old Testament. So many of God's acts in the Old Testament are incomplete. They point forward to something which will someday complete them. Sometimes Israelites sensed or saw this incompleteness clearly and spoke of a great future fulfillment. At other times God's acts seemed to the people to be complete and final. It was only in later years that our Lord or one of the inspired New Testament writers revealed the further meaning of some of these acts.

The preacher guards himself against any tendency to overemphasize the Old Testament by reminding himself that it is his great privilege to be, first and foremost, a New Testament preacher. He knows that all of God's plans and actions have reached their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He understands that all of the incompleteness of the Old Testament was designed to create a hunger and a longing in God's people which could be satisfied only in the life, death, and resurrection of the great and final Israel, Jesus of Nazareth. Richard Jungkuntz has underscored this basic New Testament understanding of the Old Testament in his article in this issue.

The preacher who sees the Old Testament in this "new" light is not yet satisfied with what has been said. He must still ask, "What, then, are the hermeneutical principles which I must apply to the Old Testament in order to find the meaning which God would have me proclaim to my people?" Most scholars will frankly admit that a great deal of work must be done on this question before any consensus is established which will be acceptable to the majority of scholars. There is enough agreement on some general rules to warrant their inclusion in this brief article. The first principle is the old maxim: *Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet; Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet*. The New Testament is embryonically concealed in the Old; the Old receives its full explanation and validation in the New. A second principle about which there is very little debate is that the Old Testament can be Christologically understood and preached in harmony with its own purpose only by the Christian. Only that man who looks at the Old Testament with his back to the cross and the tomb can appreciate what God is doing and saying. From the vantage point of faith, the Psalter, for example, becomes an enthralling record of God's acts in behalf of His people's salvation and of their response to these acts. The preacher no longer scans the Psalter for a few Messianic psalms. Admittedly some are clearly Messianic in a narrower sense, but they are all seen to be Messianic in their broad purpose.

A third principle which meets with general agreement is that the first task of the interpreter is to determine as fully as he can what a given act or word meant to the people who were originally involved. Only after he has established this has he

found the historical discipline which will enable him to bring God's Word across 3,000 years to his audience. Barnabas' exegesis is a good example of what happens to textual preaching when this all-important historical control is destroyed. Scholars have produced several excellent works on the history, the worship, and the ethics of Israel. These enable the preacher to acquaint himself with much of this necessary historical background. Most modern commentaries also provide this important background material. Another principle which most scholars would endorse is that the Old Testament story must always be related in some way to the events of the Exodus and the post-exilic restoration. A casual perusal of the Psalter makes it immediately apparent that the Exodus was as central to the faith of the Israelites as Golgotha is to the faith of Christians.

Another principle which is finding growing acceptance among Biblical scholars involves the understanding of the writing of history. A large number of seminary and university graduates prior to World War II were taught to believe that history could be written with absolute objectivity and therefore absolute factual reliability. Today the axiom of Lord Acton is again being taken seriously: history is neither made nor written without fear and love. Thus today most students of history would insist that each historical writer has a bias which affects his choice of facts and colors his presentation. Historians are content to regard history writing as an art rather than a science. Applied to the Old Testament documents, this would mean that the primary purpose of a narrative may not be to supply historical information, but may rather be to give a theological interpretation of how God was working out

His salvation in a specific historical circumstance. In many cases these two levels are seen as being identical, and there are reputable scholars who have no difficulty with the 6-day creation account or the number of Israelites involved in the Exodus, for example. But where "unevennesses" (*Unebenheiten* they were called by a former generation) or discrepancies exist, many scholars urge that the discrepancies should remain unharmonized. They prefer to find the explanation for the difference in the theological intention and purpose of each author.

This raises the difficult question of the hermeneutical relevance of source analysis. How many authors worked on the Pentateuch? Why do the vocabulary and theology of Isaiah change so radically at the end of chapter 39, as many scholars hold they do? In this area there is no consensus. The preacher should be aware that many of the most vigorous and effective preachers on the Old Testament refuse to work with the problems of source analysis. This does not necessarily mean that they deny the possibility of multiple authorship. Rather they insist upon preaching the book in that form in which God led His Old Testament church finally to preserve it. They insist that the central ideas of Exodus or Genesis do not stand or fall with source hypotheses. Other Old Testament scholars and preachers have managed to incorporate theories of source analysis into their preaching in ways that are equally effective. The whole question of the relationship of such critical studies to the understanding of the message of Scripture continues to be vigorously debated. It seems that many preachers are able to preach Old Testament theology effectively without entering upon problems of source analysis.

A further principle for preaching from the Old Testament is that Old Testament preaching should always be "present tense" preaching. To some this may sound like existentialist hermeneutics with its disregard for the value of past happenings. The statement is not meant to endorse this viewpoint. It suggests only that the preacher's concern with any Old Testament text is to bring it right down to today's date in his congregation, so that his people may stand in awe as they see God working before their eyes in a then-now sequence which is impossible to separate theologically, though it is separated chronologically.

A final principle must be mentioned. It is the old principle which was drummed into the head of every theological student in each generation: Know well the theology of the Bible; know well the theology of the Old Testament; know well the theology of the book in which you find your text; finally, know well the theology of that section of the book with which you are working.

Most of these principles, the reader may have noted, are not new or sensational. Many of them he will recognize from his textbook in Biblical or theological hermeneutics. Others may sound strange. Some of the more bitterly contested principles have been omitted from this article in the belief that their acceptance or rejection does not invalidate the basic themes of this issue. Perhaps the "new" Old Testament studies are not so much a revolution, then, as a restoration. Undoubtedly they will result in a richer and more beneficial use of the written record of God's first testament with man.

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